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We Were the Salt of the Sea

Written by Roxanne Bouchard

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We Were the Salt of the Sea

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Dredgers and trawlers

‘Well, let me tell you, *mam’zelle*, that hotel and bar over by Caplan beach – burned to the ground, it did!’

He opened the dishwasher too early, allowing a scalding cloud of steam to escape. He slammed it shut again and turned to me. Leaning over the counter, he tried to catch a glimpse of the letter from Key West I had reopened to remind myself what it said, but I pulled it away.

‘And let me tell you, quite the fire it was and all! The whole village came out for a ganders in the middle of the night. Folks even came up from Saint-Siméon and Bonaventure to see! I made the most of it and opened up the bistro. It didn’t let up for two days! The flames were licking all up the walls, and bed springs were popping all over the place. Had the firemen running around in circles, it did! You should’ve seen the ashes all over the beach! And let me tell you, it all went up in smoke! The hotel, the bar, even the slot machines! You’re not too disappointed, I hope?’

I smiled. If I’d driven for ten hours to feed the slots at the Caplan beach hotel, then yes, I probably would have been disappointed.

‘Over there, see? It was just the other side of the church – a bit further west. But now there’s nothing left of it. Must’ve been about two months ago, I’d say. Everyone knows what happened. I can’t believe you didn’t hear about it – it made the front page in the *Bay Echo*. They even did a special feature about it, with colour pages and everything! They say it was probably arson, and the insurance won’t pay up. Cases like this, they’re always looking to point the finger. But let me tell you, it’s funny they told you to go sleep there, you know...’

I checked the date. The letter had been mailed from Key West

two months ago. I put it back in my bag. I had nothing to hide, but nothing to say either. He cleared away my leftover pizza, tossed it into the bin and took a step to the side, not entirely satisfied.

‘Let me tell you just one thing, the best place to stay is at Guylaine’s, right here, just across the way. You’ll be a lot more comfortable there than up at the hotel that burned down!’

Keeping his distance this time, he opened the dishwasher again, which was still rumbling away. He picked up a red-chequered tea towel and started flapping the steam away like a matador struggling to tame a mad bull. Then, brimming with local pride, with the tip of his chin he pointed out a big house to the east of the bistro, nestled against the cliffside, looking out to sea in quiet contemplation. A charming *auberge* that promised a warm welcome.

‘It’s the finest one around! Quiet too. Guylaine doesn’t have kids or a husband. And further down, over there, that’s the fishermen’s wharf and the Café du Havre is right alongside. If it’s fishermen you want to meet, you should go there for breakfast mid-morning, when they come back in. Guylaine will be out for her walk right now, but she’s sure to stop by later. She always comes in to say hello.’

He visibly softened. Without thinking, he picked up a scalding glass, juggled with it then flung it onto the counter like a curse. He gazed out towards the *auberge* again, then turned to me with a sigh. ‘How about a coffee while you’re waiting?’

I’ve never really liked those bed and breakfasts where you’re expected to make chit-chat, tell people who you are, where you’re from, where you’re going and how long you’re staying, and listen to the owners spouting on about their country-home renovations. But it sounded like I might as well forget about finding another hotel around here, and I’d never been one for camping, so Guylaine’s was beginning to look like my only option.

He cleared my plate and empty glass away and placed a mug on the counter in front of me before charging back for more, index finger pointed questioningly at my bag. ‘If you’re looking for someone around here, I can probably help.’

I hesitated. Swivelled my chair around to face the other end of the bistro. As I recall, the sea was the only thing on my mind right then. The thick smell of it. The breakwater darkening into shadow, ready to slip beneath the heavy blanket of night. With no lights out here, how much could you see along this coast?

‘Let me tell you just one thing, though, I know plenty of folk around here.’

I still didn’t have the words to talk about her. She had always been unpronounceable; but now, all of a sudden, I had to casually drop this woman’s name into conversation. Should I roll it seven times on the tip of my tongue, swish it around my mouth like a vintage wine or crush it with my molars to soften it?

‘Spit it out, then. Who are you looking for?’

I figured I’d have to get used to the name, for a while anyway. Put on a brave face and add it to my vocabulary at least, if not my family tree. So for the first time, contemplating the sea, I said it. I took a deep breath in and let it all out.

‘Marie Garant. Do you know her?’

He recoiled. All the sparkle in his face fizzled out, as if I’d blown out a candle. Suddenly on his guard, he looked at me suspiciously.

‘She a friend of yours?’

‘No. I don’t actually know her.’

He picked up the glass again and started rubbing the heck out of it.

‘Phew! You had me worried there. Because let me tell you, that Marie Garant, she’s no woman to get close to. Especially not you, if you’re a tourist that is. I wouldn’t go around shouting about her if you want to make any friends around here.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘But you’re not from around here, so you weren’t to know, of course.’

‘No, I wasn’t.’

‘Is she the reason you’re here?’

‘Er ... No.’ It was barely a lie. ‘I’m on holiday.’

‘Ah! So you *are* a tourist! Well then, welcome! I’m Renaud. Renaud Boissonneau, dean of students at the high school and businessman with business aplenty!’

‘Er, pleased to meet you.’

‘Let me tell you, we’ll take good care of you. How did you like the pizza? Most of the tourists haven’t arrived yet – this place is usually full of them. That’s right, it’s always packed here. People think it’s nice and rustic. Did you see the decor? This place has history, let me tell you. Because you might not have noticed, but we’re in the old rectory. That’s why the church is right next door! The patio wraps all the way around, so anyone who wants to avert their eyes from the steeple while they’re drinking their beer can go and look at the sea or the fisherman’s wharf instead. Oh, and the curate lives upstairs. Which means, let me tell you, that when you’ve had a couple of drinks and you’re ready to confess your sins, you can just go right on up!’

Having successfully tamed the dishwasher, he was now noisily unloading some mercifully unbreakable plates.

‘I do pretty much everything around here, I do. How about that decor? ... See. I was the one who did it all. Let me tell you, I brought up everything I could find in the basement. See how original it is? There’s wagon wheels up on the ceiling with oil lamps hanging from them, clogs, little wooden birdhouses, tools, saws, cables and rope, and I hung some old oilskins in the corner. Do you need a rain jacket? I suppose it’s been a nice day today. But it has rained a lot the last little while, don’t you think?’

‘I hadn’t noticed.’

‘Ah, a city girl!’

As if the distance gave him permission to confide in me, he leaned in to whisper something. ‘And let me tell you, I do all the decor, wait tables and wash the dishes, but you’ll never guess what – soon I’m going to be cook’s helper as well! At fifty-three! Never too old to be young again, *mam’zelle!*’

He straightened up and slammed the dishwasher shut again.

‘Everything you see over there, it’s all from our place. That globe, them old cameras, the marine charts, the grandfather clock, the two-handed saw, the horseshoes. Do we say horseshoes or horse’s shoes? Let me tell you, I reckon you can say either. Oh, and them bottles, the clay pots, them mismatched mugs, even the recipe books! So tell me, which way did you come? Through the valley or round the point?’

‘Er, through the valley.’

‘Good on you, not going out of your way for nothing!’

He rubbed the counter like he was trying to make his rag all dizzy.

‘Out of my way for nothing?’

‘The point! Percé, the Northern Gannets, Bonaventure Island ... talk about going out of your way for nothing, *mam’zelle!* Think you want to go there?’

‘I don’t know. I haven’t made any plans yet.’

‘Because we just got some tourist brochures in today! I haven’t read through them yet, but ... Ah! If it isn’t the fair Guylaine herself!’

All at once, he flung the rag away into the sink as if he had dirt on his hands.

Guylaine Leblanc, to look at her, must have been at least sixty-five. With salt-and-pepper hair pulled up into a loose bun, she had about her that air of goodness that grandmothers in American family movies exude. She laughed tenderly with a twinkle in her eye for Renaud, who was clearly putty in her hands.

‘Have you met our new tourist, Guylaine? What was your name again?’

‘Catherine.’

‘Catherine what?’

‘Day. Catherine Day.’

‘Catherine Day wants to stay at yours; you have a room for her, don’t you?’

Renaud kissed Guylaine on both cheeks and then she walked me over to her sewing shop, Le Point de Couture, on the south side of Highway 132, where she sold clothes and did alterations. The *auberge*

was at the rear of the shop, well away from any road noise. The vast ground floor was decorated in the same fashion as Renaud's bistro with a surprisingly comforting hodgepodge of antiques and easy chairs, and there was a deep veranda overlooking the shore. Guylaine had three rooms for tourists upstairs; she must have slept somewhere at the top of the staircase that led to the attic. She gave me a room facing the sea – her favourite, she said – all decked out in white and blue, with driftwood trim and a hand-stitched quilt on the bed. It was a very nice room.

